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Geopolitics and security in the Arctic: what role for the EU?

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Abstract The Arctic has received considerable attention over the last decade due to climate change, positive resource appraisals and the increased military presence in the region. Portrayals range from those that warn of impending conflicts to those that emphasise the region's unique cooperative environment. To what extent are the generalisations about Arctic security and geopolitics accurate? What fuels these generalisations? Moreover, what is the role of the EU in this changing geopolitical environment? This article examines the causes of conflict in the Arctic and argues that the disputes over territory, resources and the North Pole are limited in magnitude. At the same time, the security dynamics within the Arctic are relevant, given each state's relations to Russia. The EU's role, however, is less a geopolitical one and more concerned with two dimensions, namely *awareness* and *support*. For EU policymakers and decision-makers, understanding the complexities of the north should take priority over re-inventing the Union's role in the region.

Keywords Arctic | Security | Resource conflict | EU foreign policy | European Union | Russia

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Introduction

At the start of the millennium, researchers, media and policymakers alike began making a range of claims about the future of the Arctic region. The Arctic was portrayed as the world's new energy frontier and the next arena for geopolitical conflict (Grindheim 2009). Coupled with these claims were positive estimates of the region's hydrocarbon resources (USGS 2008; Hobér 2011; Claes and Moe 2014) and the lure of finally making use of the northern 'shortcut' to Asia for shipping (Ho 2011; Jakobson 2010; Østreng 1999). As a result of all this, the region attracted considerable attention worldwide. In the aftermath, a number of scholars portrayed the Arctic as a region where empirical analysis could support predictions of imminent conflict (Borgerson 2008; Huebert 2013; Sale and Potapov 2010; Ho 2011).

In 2008 the European Commission focused attention on the Arctic when it stated that 'the overall effect is that climate change will fuel existing conflicts over depleting resources, especially where access to those resources is politicised' (Solana and Ferrero-Waldner 2008, 3). In the predictions of conflict in the Arctic, Russia holds centre stage. Since 2007 there has been an increase in the number of flights by Russian bombers, which fly along the north Norwegian coast or across the North Pole from the Kola Peninsula (Hilde 2014; Expert Commission 2015, 17, 20). Russia has been increasing its investment in military infrastructure in the Arctic: it has constructed new military bases in the north, manufactured up to 40 new icebreakers and established two special 'Arctic brigades' (Conley and Rohloff 2015, 9; see also Osborn 2017). When Russia's relationships with the other Arctic states—Canada, the US, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark (Greenland) and Iceland—began to deteriorate in 2014, headlines warning about an imminent confrontation in the north reappeared in the media (Dougherty 2015). Writers have concluded that the Arctic has become militarised, that littoral states have been placing pieces on the chessboard in advance of an imminent geopolitical conflict.

Scholars have shown, however, that such hastily-arrived-at views are inaccurate. Over the past decade they have produced more nuanced depictions of the dynamics both within the region as a whole and amongst various players with a stake in the Arctic (Hoogensen Gjørnv and Goloviznina 2014; Tamnes and Offerdal 2014b; Greaves and Lackenbauer 2016). Building on these studies, this article seeks to answer the following questions: What are the current security dynamics in the Arctic? And what role should the EU play?

The race for resources

The increase in activity does not imply that a stand-off is imminent. The foremost argument of those who believe there will be a conflict over the Arctic has been the region's abundance of resources. But this argument is not supported by the facts concerning the location and accessibility of these resources. The lion's share of them—both onshore

and offshore—are located in the territories or economic zones of the Arctic states themselves. Estimates vary since the total quantity of the resources is still somewhat uncertain. All the same, approximately 90% of the oil and gas resources of the circumpolar north are already under the control of the littoral states (Claes and Moe 2014). This situation fuels, not a race northward to grab unclaimed resources, but a desire for stable operating environments to extract costly resources far from their prospective markets (Keil 2014).

This is linked to other factors, namely the lack of economic profitability in the Arctic and the slow pace of offshore resource development. Here, again, there has been a tendency to generalise across the region and speak of ‘Arctic resources’. The truth is that the accessibility of resources and the potential for exploiting them vary greatly from region to region (Harsem et al. 2011). Oil and gas production is already taking place in the Barents Sea, an offshore area where more than 100 exploratory wells have been drilled. Climatic conditions are different in the waters around Greenland and Alaska, as is the availability of infrastructure, which means that companies operating in these regions are faced with a different economic reality (Østhagen 2013). Thus, it is difficult to make generalisations about resource development in the Arctic. Indeed, the harsh climate, the distances involved and the lack of infrastructure make it questionable whether the littoral states will even be able to exploit the resources in their own economic zones (Łuszczuk et al. 2014).

Moreover, the Arctic riches have been almost completely allocated to the various states in the region. The largest maritime border dispute—between Norway and Russia over the Barents Sea—was settled in 2010 (Hoel 2014). Minor border disputes exist between the US and Canada over the Beaufort Sea and between Canada and Greenland (Denmark) over the Lincoln Strait. But these disagreements will arguably not give rise to conflicts of any appreciable scale (Byers and Østhagen 2017). The oft-cited dispute between Canada, Denmark/Greenland and Russia over who can claim the North Pole seabed is unlikely to become anything more than a diplomatic conflict. As Byers (2014) contends, the North Pole is a distraction. The Arctic states have neither the economic nor the strategic incentive to undertake any significant operations to assert and establish further claims over the seabed of the North Pole. Symbolism is undoubtedly of great value, but the cost of North Pole operations is not matched by the Pole’s perceived gains (Byers 2013, 281–3). Even if we do see a spike in worldwide commodity prices in the next decade, Arctic resource extraction will remain a specialised, localised and costly affair. Conditions and thresholds vary across the Arctic, but an oil price of at least \$50–\$60 per barrel—and for certain regions even \$100—is needed for operations to be commercially viable (Łuszczuk et al. 2014; Mathiesen 2015). In contrast to the South China Sea—which is often used as a point of comparison with the Arctic—the maritime and territorial disputes have been settled, and positive-sum outcomes are attainable.

Consequently, the Arctic states all have an interest in creating a favourable political environment for investment and economic development. The expectations of a scramble for resources have been founded on thin ice. Outright military conflict with other

states to claim a limited quantity of out-of-bounds offshore resources—many of which look likely to remain unexplored for at least the next couple of decades—is neither economically nor politically profitable. The argument that the race for resources will result in an outright conflict over the Arctic does not hold.

Security dynamics

In 2007 Russia planted its flag on the seabed below the North Pole. The following year, in response to the ensuing outcry and to concerns about the ‘lack of governance’ in the Arctic,¹ the five Arctic coastal states convened in Ilulissat, Greenland to declare the Arctic a region of cooperation. They also affirmed their intentions to work within established international arrangements and agreements, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.² Since Ilulissat the mantra of *all* the Arctic states has been cooperation, as stated in the relatively streamlined Arctic policy and strategy documents (Heininen 2012). The Arctic Council’s emergence as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this since the organisation serves as an arena where the states can portray themselves as working harmoniously towards common goals, while still retaining their veto rights (Young 2010). As Tamnes and Offerdal argue, ‘[d]iscord does exist, but the main characteristics of the region are cooperation, stability and peace’ (2014a, 167). This situation was not changed by the events in Ukraine in 2014 as the Arctic states have made efforts to keep the region separate from the geopolitics of Ukraine, the Middle East and the Korean peninsula (Østhagen 2016).

The Arctic’s importance to national security and defence policies also varies considerably across the region. The dividing line appears to lie between the European Arctic and its North American counterpart, falling together with variations in climatic conditions. Whereas the north Norwegian and the north-west Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter, the ice—although in decline—is an ever-constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian and Greenlandic Arctic (Hilde 2014). Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, spillover of security issues between the various parts of the Arctic is in turn relatively limited. Despite the rhetoric suggesting otherwise, Russian investment in Arctic troops and infrastructure has had very little impact on Canada’s security outlook (Lackenbauer 2011). Indeed, Russian actions with bomber and fighter planes may cause alarm, but the real threat to Alaska and the Canadian Arctic is limited.

On the other hand, the Arctic states themselves are not exempt from conflict and instability. Although a struggle *over* the Arctic is not cause for immediate concern, the regional relationships with Russia *in* the Arctic cannot be completely sheltered from further deterioration in the relationships between the Kremlin and certain of the Arctic states. Despite the emphasis on governance and regime building by the Arctic nations’ foreign ministries, an amicable regional order is not an inherent and unchallenged trait of the region. The

¹ See the sections in the European Parliament’s resolution of 9 October 2008 that describe the need for a new Arctic governance structure (European Parliament 2008).

² The document can be found here: http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf.

Arctic states have a multitude of interests at play simultaneously, and some of these clash with the idea of a peaceful region. In particular, this concerns sovereignty enforcement by maintaining a military presence in the north and the occurrence of small-scale disputes over the protection of sovereign rights—including rights related to fishing. Although the Arctic states have dedicated themselves to ensuring that the region remains peaceful and a place of cooperation, security infringements can still occur. The strategic importance of the Arctic for the European countries, especially Norway and Russia, should not be underestimated when discussing Arctic security. The situation in the north is therefore more complex than the conflict/non-conflict scenarios might suggest.

What role for the EU in Arctic security?

Within this security environment, what role is there for the EU? An ambivalence characterises the EU's involvement in the Arctic. On the one hand, the Union has an obvious presence in the north in terms of market access and regulation; its member states Finland, Sweden and Denmark; and its various relationships with the other Arctic states. On the other hand, the EU's efforts to become involved constructively in the Arctic have proved both controversial and complex over the last decade. First, it does not have direct access to the Arctic Ocean, a situation that has led some to question the extent of its relevance to the Arctic (Stępień and Raspotnik 2015). Second, some of the strategic documents on the Arctic published by both the European Commission (2008, 2012) and the European Parliament (2008, 2011) have a slightly paternalistic tone: they portray the EU as the solution to the region's growing problems. Debates in Brussels at the time seemed to have been caught in a struggle between those who wanted to utilise the Arctic as a symbol of climate change and human inaction, and those who preferred a moderate approach that was sensitive to the Arctic states and their indigenous populations (Raspotnik and Østhagen 2014). These debates have not always been well received in Norway, Iceland, Canada, Russia or the US (Offerdal 2011; Østhagen and Raspotnik 2015). Finally, the EU's own commitment to the region has fluctuated as more pressing issues have arisen on the agenda.

Nevertheless, on account of its geography and policy links with the Arctic, the EU has an overriding interest in participating in the international debate on the region. Additionally, internal systemic interests and foreign policy aspirations are driving the EU towards developing its own Arctic policy. The Union's 'Global Strategy' for its foreign and security policy refers to the Arctic as an area of interest, especially in relations with Russia (European Union 2016). And in 2016 the Commission and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published the third version of the EU's Arctic policy (European Commission 2016), following the two earlier communications issued by the Commission on the Arctic (European Commission 2008, 2012). Since 2008, EU policymaking has thus progressed towards a more nuanced, moderate approach that takes into account the existing regional regimes and the complexities of the region.³

³ For a more in-depth analysis of developments in the EU's Arctic policy, see Stępień and Raspotnik 2015, and Keil and Raspotnik 2014.

The EU does indeed have a clear, though limited, role to play in the Arctic. This role should centre less on direct action in the region and more on *awareness* and *support*. In terms of *awareness*, the EU should participate in relevant meetings in the north, such as those organised by the Arctic Council, the Barents Regional Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. Knowing what is happening in the region, while also establishing working relations with the main players (states, indigenous groups, companies, and local and regional governments) will be crucial when, or if, the EU needs to become more involved in the Arctic.

In terms of *support*, the EU has the potential to encourage further local and regional business development through its research funds and innovation mechanisms, which are directly applicable to Sweden, Finland and Greenland, and applicable to an extent to Norway and Iceland. It can help set high standards for EU players' activities *in* the Arctic, ranging from tourism to shipping and fisheries. Moreover, it can serve as a platform for low-level cooperation and dialogue with Russia in the north, in domains where all parties benefit from cooperation, such as trade, environmental protection and emergency preparedness.⁴

The EU's direct security role in the Arctic, however, is restricted. It can assist and encourage dialogue through forums such as the Northern Chiefs of Defence Forum and Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. It can assist with intelligence sharing, and its member states can contribute to maritime security operations if needed. However, for four of the five Arctic coastal states, the primary security guarantee comes through NATO. Moreover, as the region is relatively peaceful and amicable, the actual need for security operations and a clear EU presence is limited.

Conclusion

Concern about outright conflict *over* the Arctic is largely inaccurate. It does not communicate the essence of the more nuanced discussions of this vast region and the differing roles it plays in the security outlook of the Arctic states. The potential for conflict in the Arctic should not be overstated, but neither should it be ignored. The region still stands as a theatre for potential clashes with Russia. Yet this has little to do with symbolic quarrels over the North Pole, and everything to do with the relationship between Russia and the other Arctic states—both regionally and globally. When thinking about Arctic security, it is more relevant to divide the area into sub-regions: the North American Arctic and the Eurasian Arctic.

It is not possible to boil the dynamics of this region down to the mutually exclusive options of conflict or no-conflict. Under certain circumstances small-scale conflicts in parts of the Arctic are possible. In such situations, it is the relationship between Russia and the other Arctic states that determines the parameters for the security environment.

⁴ These suggestions are based on a study conducted in June 2016 by the author and Andreas Raspotnik on behalf of the North Norway European Office in Brussels (Østhagen and Raspotnik 2016).

This is the case especially for incidents involving resource management where coastal states are safeguarding sovereign rights. Within this environment the EU has a particular role to play, albeit not a leading one. It can ensure that its member states and institutions (and related players) are aware of the complexities in the region, whether these relate to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples or to Russia's (or other Arctic states') military investments. Similarly, it can support northern development through mechanisms devised for research and innovation. These points are limited in their direct relevance to security matters and are less relevant to the EU as a geopolitical player in its own neighbourhood. Yet they speak to the complexities of the northern part of the world and to the EU's relationship with it.

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